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CHAPTER XXVII

Desert Guides and Trackers

622 On 27th November, 1935, I visited and had a long talk with Shaikh
619 Mutluq al Musailim, the paramount chief of the Rashaida, in his camp. Among other things he admitted that his tribe was related to the great Hutaim group lying east of Madina. This is the powerful group whose paramount shaikhs are Ibn Barák and Ibn Naumas, and which as a whole is an "inferior" tribe.

485 He maintained that his people, the Rashaida, possessed without exception the finest guides throughout Arabia. He had men, he said, who could guide a stranger without any preparation from Kuwait to

(*a*) Damascus
(*b*) Amman
(*c*) Wejh
(*d*) Madina
(*e*) Mecca
(*f*) Ebha
(*g*) Najran
(*h*) Wadi Dawasir
(*i*) Riyadh and its environs
(*j*) Hasa and Qatar

485 The best guide in all Arabia was, in his opinion, Ibn Hadhabba of
828 his tribe, now employed by Ibn Sa'ud on his permanent staff. Ibn
151 Hadhabba was one of a family of that name, all of whom, even the women, seemed to be endowed with the same skill. The gift was born in these men, he said, not acquired in any way, and was akin to the sort of fifth sense an animal possessed. It mattered not if the sun shone or not by day, or if the sky was overcast at night, the Rashaidi could find his way anywhere. He never forgot a desert feature once seen, however small and insignificant.

On the other hand, Shaikh Mutluq admitted freely that his own tribe were not trackers. The palm in this science went easily to the Al Murra tribe of South Hasa and Jabrin. Tracking, or *ma'arifat al jarra* as it was called, was entirely different from the science of guiding or *ma'arifat al dalála*. The latter implied perfect knowledge of ground with a perfect eye for country, stars, etc., the former was more un-

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canny, and consisted in an almost animal faculty for following up the tracks of man, camel, horse or sheep, and describing from the tracks the exact type of person or animal that had left its spoor. For instance, it was easy for a Murri, he said, to say whether the tracks of a simple single camel were those of a white camel (*wadha*), or a brown camel (*humra*), or a black camel (*sauda*), and still easier to say if it was male or female, in calf or not.

The Murra skill was so great, contended Shaikh Mutluq, that in following the tracks of a human female a tracker could say whether the person was married or single, and whether she was pregnant or not.

I have myself observed some very remarkable examples of Murra skill, and have been told numberless others by men like H.M. King 'Abdul 'Aziz al Sa'ud, who would have no reason to exaggerate. The Murra tribe are related to the 'Ajman, and both claim descent from Yam, the ancestor of the Bani Yam of Najran in North-East Yaman. Possibly their origin is Himyaritic. All three tribes are considered *sharif* tribes, and in appearance are all more or less alike. They have broad foreheads, eyes set wide apart, and chin running into a sharp small point. This is especially the case with the women. The apparently weak chin is, in the case of the man, usually hidden by a finer beard than is common among other Badawin.

The following is a personal experience. In February 1920 I was riding from Hufuf to Ojair in Hasa by a rather more circuitous and southern route than that usually used, as I wanted to examine the nature of certain ground. I had been the guest of Bin Sa'ud in Hufuf for some seventeen days. My escort consisted of twelve of Bin Sa'ud's braves under a youth called Báni. This fine young lad told me that he had just arrived in Hufuf from Riyadh for the first time in his life, and therefore had to depend on others' knowledge of the country. Half way to the coast we met an enormous herd of Murra camels with numerous baby camels slowly grazing in a northerly direction. The country was dune country and we did not see a soul, though no doubt all our movements were being watched by a hundred eyes.

Presently Báni suggested a drink of camel's milk all round. No sooner said than done. A she-camel was easily caught, milked into a panikin of wood (*jiddi*), and we all had a delightful drink. Coffee followed and we sat down for a twenty minutes' rest. Presently a

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migrated from Central Arabia. Before Ibn Hadhdhal, the greatest shaikh in the Syrian desert had been Ibn Jesham, who now lives in poverty on the Lower Euphrates.

It was, indeed, related that an Arab petitioner had once accosted His Majesty King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud by the title of Chief of the Arabs, but that the latter had protested: "I take refuge with God, my son! The Chief of the Arabs is Ibn Hadhdhal." With less than 200 years of rule to their credit, the Sauds were a new family to the Arabs.

When this story was repeated to Ibn Hadhdhal, he interrupted the narrator to object: "I take refuge with God, my son!" said the old chieftain. "The chief of the Arabs is Ibn Jesham." Such was the modest chivalry of these old chiefs, although all of them were at war with one another.

From Ibn Hadhdhal I obtained a letter to Al Nuri ibn Shaalan, chief of the Ruwallah. A retainer of Fahad's, Burjas al Dhafiri, was detailed to accompany us on our journey, to save us from molestation by the Amarat. He could not, of course, protect us from raiders from other tribes. Burjas came from the Dhafir tribe, not the Amarat. He had been obliged to flee from his relatives owing to a blood feud, and had taken refuge with Ibn Hadhdhal, whose trusted retainer he had become. Burjas was so short-sighted that he was almost blind, but he knew the desert perfectly for hundreds of miles. As we rode along, he would cross-question us as to what we could see. "To the north-west, there should soon appear two low round hills each surmounted by a heap of stones, like a woman's breasts." "Can you see on the south a tall grey peak? It is Feridat al Wa'ar."

Burjas, half-blind, carried 200,000 square miles of desert in his mind's eye, and could estimate when every distant landmark would come into view.

We made for the water-holes at Al Molussi, in the hope of hearing news of Ibn Shaalan. The water-holes were in a narrow valley at the foot of a rocky cliff. There was nobody camped on the water. We stopped to drink, when suddenly we were startled by a voice calling: "What are you, O camel riders?"

High above us on the rocky cliff face sat three men, each holding a rifle. Burjas argued with them without revealing our identity,

485 for we were at their mercy had they proved to be hostile. They
609 eventually identified themselves as Sba'a, a tribe friendly to the Amarat. They told us that they were picketing the well to watch for a raiding party led by Sultan al Tayyar—Sultan the Flier—of which they had received warning. They advised us to be on the look-out.

609 It was about ten o'clock one morning when we topped a low desert ridge and came in sight of a wide grassy hollow thickly covered with black bedouin tents, in the middle of which the huge tent of the shaikh was plainly visible. It was not without trepidation that we tapped our camels into their briskest walk, and closed in on one another, flank touching flank and neck to neck, so as to make a dignified entry. Perhaps because every man in the desert went with his life in his hands, and anyone he met might be an enemy, the bedouins were always careful to make a
609 dignified and reserved arrival at a strange camp. We dismounted,
576 hobbled our camels and, wrapping our cloaks around us, advanced at a stately walk side by side. A negro slave who was making coffee unrolled a rug for us to sit on. A few men sitting in the tent returned our salutation, and we sat down in silence.

609 Perhaps ten minutes elapsed before Al Nuri himself entered, a fierce, glowering face, with a hawk-like nose and bright, piercing eyes. He sat down without a word of welcome and another long silence ensued. At a scarcely perceptible gesture from the old man, his clerk rolled a cigarette and placed it between his fingers. A slave stepped forward quickly with a glowing ember in a tongs to light it. The shaikh puffed in silence and glowered round. Burjas rose and crossed the tent, and laid our letter of introduction before him. "Fahad sends you his greetings," he said. But the chief only grunted, and the letter remained lying in front of him on the ground. Another ten minutes of silence ensued. Then the shaikh beckoned his clerk to read the letter to him, for he could neither read nor write. Now at last, I thought, his churlish manners will change, for I knew what was in the letter.

The secretary read in a low voice in the shaikh's ear. When it was finished, the latter gave a grunt and relapsed once more into silence and cigarette smoke. The tension was increasing and I began to grow angry. The remainder of our journey was across

12: Glubb G-3 (1930-1948) 1948 MG1 Jordan
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country. Few people in Britain have realized to what an extent personal and national freedom may be divorced, a point so clearly brought out by Gibbon at the head of this chapter. In Turkish days, the Arabs had no political existence, but as individuals they were as free as any men in the world. Their freedom admittedly owed nothing to Turkish generosity. It was due solely to the inability of the Government to control them.

We slept but one night in the camp of Ibn Shaalan. Next morning we set out once more, having bidden farewell to Burjas, and accompanied by one Qasim ash Shemam, a swarthy villain, detailed to accompany us by Al Nuri. We had scarcely ridden for an hour when we were stopped by two camel riders who overtook us, waving their cloaks to show that they were not hostile, an advisable precaution in those days when the custom of the desert was often to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. They proved to be the nephews of the shaikh, Khalid and Trad ibn Shaalan. In contrast to Al Nuri, they greeted us only with smiles and expressions of welcome, and begged us to spend the rest of the day with them. We protested in vain that we had ridden for only an hour. Half laughing and persuading, half compelling, they turned the heads of our camels, and we soon came upon the big black tent concealed in a small valley in the bare, rocky hills.

There could be no doubt of the warmth of our welcome here. Not only were we obliged to eat and drink almost continuously all day, but Trad pronounced himself dissatisfied with our outfit. It is true that the weather was cold, and the Syrian desert can be bitter when a north wind howls over these barren steppes. First I was obliged to accept some warm gloves, then a magnificent pair of black French boots with pointed toes and buttoning halfway up the calf. I was doubtful for which sex they were originally intended. Sugar, tea, meat, bread and other additions were made to our provisions. It was with difficulty that I resisted the offer of a smart suit of clothes and a better riding camel.

An officer or administrator can rarely obtain a true impression of the people in the district in which he works. To do so, few methods can be better than to travel through the country unknown and poorly dressed, with one or two companions. I was quite unknown to Khalid and Trad, and they were themselves powerful

12: Glubb G-3 (1930-1946) 1948 MG1 Jordan
Bedouins. 1954

and wealthy shaikhs, who had nothing to seek from me. Many years later, I was able to acknowledge their kindness and do a very little to help them.

Next morning we left the tent of Khalid and Trad, and set out across the desert for the west. Before noon we came across a tribe on the move, the vast flocks of camels walking and grazing slowly, the caravan of loaded camels, the shaikns' women in gaily decorated litters ornamented with red tassels and rows of white shells, the men and boys walking or riding, and the flocks of sheep. Half a mile ahead rode the chief with the advanced guard —three camelmen and two horsemen, one with a hawk on his wrist and a greyhound trotting beside his mare. Our guide, Qasim ash Shemam, must needs trot over to them to gossip. I rode parallel to the group twenty or thirty yards away. Suddenly they all looked my way, and a stentorian voice called out, "God damn the English and Ibn Shaalan who shelters them!" The infidel and the stranger were not always welcome, it seemed. It was Fayyadh ibn Jendal, a tribesman of the old school. Ten years later I was to be a close friend of his son and nephew. But the fortune of the day brought us in the evening to Melih al Ga'ga, of a family who had been themselves chiefs of the Ruwallah before the rise of the Shaalan. Here we once more met with the same cordial welcome as from Khalid and Trad. An argument arose between our host and his young son in front of the tent. We could hear an exchange of angry words between them. Qasim later informed us that the boy demanded that his father slaughter a camel for our dinner, whereas the old man said that a whole sheep would suffice. Such are the extravagancies of Arab hospitality, amongst people who themselves live perilously near to the starvation level.

The ensuing days were less eventful. A bitter north-west wind howled in our faces. Sand and dust filled the air so thickly that we could see only a few hundred yards. At night we failed to find any tribal camps, and shivered cheerless in the open, beneath the gusts of stinging sand. It was not safe to light a fire for fear of raiding parties.

The camel is capable of covering great distances in twenty-four hours, but the idea that the "swift dromedary" skims across the

30: Gt. Britain G-5 (ca. 1918) 1920 MJ1 Saudi Arabia
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Tribe.	*Sub-Tribe.*	*Clan.*
Hutaim (*continued*):	*Beni Rashīd* (*continued*):	*Fehjāt* *Bedaunah*
	Jerābis. Nr. Wejh	
Sulubba	*Seidān.* In Nejd *Ghaneimi.* In Nejd *Suleib* Ibn Mālik. In 'Irāq and the Hamād	
Hawāzin No Paramount Sheikh of their own tribe, that authority having passed to the Sultan of Koweit	*Kā'ah*	*Hadhālīn* *Bureikāt* *Shaqufah*
	Ghiyādh	*Malā'ibah* *Musāhimah* *Musā'idah* *Adhyeibāt* *Jawāsirah* *Muhālibah* *Muweijīyah* *Aghrubah* *Karāshah* *Sawābir*
Sunnā'. Smiths		
Nawār. Gipsies		

7. *The 'Uqeil*

The **'UQEIL** (Ageyl) are the guides and conductors of caravans in Arabia. They are not a tribe but an organization partaking of the nature of a club or society or a masonic lodge. They have no connexion with the ancient 'Uqeil tribe of the Ahl esh-Shimāl, from whom the Muntefiq claim descent; this seems to have disappeared and left no trace. The modern 'Uqeil are all Nejd Arabs, townsfolk or nomads of any tribe from Hasa, 'Āridh, Qasīm or Jebel Shammar; but men of Sedeir and the Wādi Dawāsir are not admitted; nor are members admitted from any of the big tribes, such as the Harb and Ateibah, who are engaged in interminable blood feuds, the object being to keep the 'Uqeil society neutral. Settled Beni Tamīm and Beni Khālid of Nejd and Qasīm are most suitable for its purposes. The head-quarters of the society are at Baghdad, and its president, who is always a native of Boreidah, lives at Baghdad and there enrols the members.

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The 'Uqeil are of two kinds: **Jemāmīl**, camel-men forming the fraternity of caravan leaders, and **Dhogorti**, poor men, pedlars and mercenaries, who help to compose an irregular cavalry under the Ottoman flag and serve as escort to the Hajj and as guards to the *kellas*, stations or halting-places, on the Hajj road. These last do not belong to the society. The true 'Uqeil are recognized throughout Arabia as professional guides whose presence vouches for a caravan of merchants or travellers and removes it from all suspicion of hostile intentions. It is the 'Uqeil who conduct the camel-trade of the desert, being employed by the dealers of Damascus to purchase from the tribes in Arabia, in the Syrian Desert, and in Mesopotamia.

Such an institution as this society, with universal freedom of passage, is essential to the conduct of business in Arabia, where no tribesman, unless he be engaged on a raiding expedition, dare venture outside his own tribal territory for fear of hereditary feuds and enmities which imperil his existence. The possible service they can render to European travellers is dealt with on p. 21. It is very dangerous for such a traveller to assume the character of an 'Uqeil: but Arabs, who wish to shield the caravan in which the traveller is from molestation, will sometimes impose it on him (this was done to Shakespear near Wādi el-'Arabah in 1914). His best course then is, on the approach of any stranger, to feign illness and remain rolled up, face and all.